

THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOVERNMENT SURVEYING EXPEDITION.

I AM not prone to superstition; although it is my belief that a germ of superstitious feeling, which may be stimulated into action under extraordinary circumstances, or peculiar conditions of mind or body—and which no amount of mental culture nor philosophic reasoning can entirely eradicate—is latent in every human being.

The possession of such a feeling, however, does not necessarily imply that the possessor believes in the existence of a supernatural agency, having control over the ordinary affairs of life; and, for my own part, I confess that—save in the one solitary instance to which this story refers—I have never seen nor heard anything of apparently mysterious import that could not, upon due investigation, be distinctly traced to perfectly natural causes.

I confess, however, my utter inability to account, by any rational means, for the events related in the following pages. Had the story been told to me as a fact, by any one on whose truthfulness I could place the most perfect reliance, I should have taken it for granted that the narrator believed he had heard or seen all that he affirmed, but that he had been deluded by his own over-excited imagination. Nevertheless, I solemnly avow that I did actually behold or hear all that I have related; that the several occurrences were seen or heard at the same moment by my friends and companions for the time being, as clearly and distinctly as

by myself; that nothing had previously occurred to excite our minds, nor (as will appear in the sequel) had we ever even heard of the tragedy which appears to have been partially revealed to us; that the impression made upon me by these revelations remains as perfect as ever; and that in describing what I heard and beheld, I have neither invented nor exaggerated in the slightest degree.

My story, however, requires some little prelude.

On the first formation of the Hudson's Bay Fur Company, in 1669, and for many years afterwards, it was a matter of no slight difficulty to procure a supply of suitable persons to act as clerks, storekeepers, station masters, &c., and to undertake the numerous subordinate employments in the Company's service. Nor is this to be wondered at, when the various requirements demanded from the candidates for such offices are considered.

It was required that they should be young men—those in the first flush of youthful manhood being preferred; of reputable family; possessed of some little education, although the standard in this latter respect was not very high; honest, vigorous, healthy, courageous, and capable of enduring hardship and privation.

If this had been all that was demanded, the difficulty would not have been so great. There are always to be found in England and Scotland—and it was from the latter country that the majority of the Company's subordinate officers were, and are still, to a great extent derived—a sufficient number of young men possessed of these various attributes, eager to enter any service that promises novelty and adventure and future preferment.

But much more than this had to be considered at the early period to which I refer.

These young men, once engaged, were sent away into the—at that period—far distant, wild, and desolate regions of North-west America, there to take up their abode for years, in the midst of an unexplored territory, of vast extent, almost wholly covered with apparently interminable forests, and sparsely populated with savage Indians.

Here, for year after year, they existed, perfectly isolated from civilized society, living in small communities, and often even quite alone, separated from one another by the bleak and icy bay from which the terri-

tory derives its appellation, or by wide extents of dense forests, wild wildernesses, or gloomy morass, through which there was no road, and scarcely a path passable by others than Indians, or hunters almost as wild and savage as the Indians themselves. Some among them were doomed to live a life of dreary solitude, in lonely huts or "stations," buried deep in the heart of the gloomy forest: the Indians and hunters who came from time to time to traffic with them for their winter spoil of fur skins their only visitors, save when at long distant intervals—often a twelvemonth or more apart—some one or more of their fellow-servants passing from one district to another, or some superior officer of the Company bound on a general survey, claimed their hospitality for a night or two, and marked a pleasant era in their monotonous existence.

Thus shut out from the abodes of civilization, almost utterly excluded from society; never by any chance seeing the face or form of a female of their own race; too often possessing little within themselves to occupy their minds, and rarely hearing of anything that was going forward in the busy world beyond the dismal territory in which they were doomed to pass their lives—until, perchance, after long years of service, when youth with all its bright hopes and aspirations had departed from them, they were promoted in middle age to some higher post, and removed from their dreary solitude to one or another of the Company's superior stations or depôts, in the vicinity of some town or settlement—what marvel that, whatever had once been the disposition or temperament of these individuals, they became morose and gloomy, careless of and unfitted for the society from which they had been so long estranged, and sought and found their sole enjoyment in the gratification of their gross and sensual appetites?

The very attributes which fitted them for the position they held were calculated, under the circumstances in which they were placed, to bring about this unhappy result.

Their vigorous youth, high spirits, and adventurous dispositions demanded greater opportunities for healthy exercise and enjoyment than were open to them. The majority, as I have said, had little within themselves wherewith to occupy their minds during the long periods of solitude and compulsory idleness to which they were subjected, and the few who were possessed of superior edu-

cation soon ceased to profit from this possession. Indeed, it was generally remarked that those who belonged to the best families in the "old country," who had been gentlemen "at home," became eventually the grossest sensualists, and were least inclined to submit to the restraints and resume the habits of civilized society.

These had been the most bitterly disappointed. They had entered the service of the Company, as had many of their less educated comrades, for the sake of the adventurous life they had expected to lead—as so many young men take service in India, or emigrate to other colonies, with the same object in view. Perhaps all are more or less disappointed in the high anticipations they have formed? All, in course of time, become more or less estranged from the conventional habits of English society. Nevertheless, they form a society among themselves, in which they are content to live, and in which they find healthful enjoyment.

But in former days, when it required six months or more to convey a letter to and receive a reply from the settled portions of North America, and when travel in the interior of the country was equally slow and still more difficult, the Hudson's Bay adventurers found themselves, as I have said, not only completely isolated from the rest of the world, but also separated by impassable distances from one another. They could form no society among themselves, and they gradually sank into the condition of semi-savages—those who felt the disappointment most keenly sinking deepest into sensuality.

These things are changed now; travel is more rapid and communication more easy, while thriving settlements and populous towns and villages now exist, where formerly dense, gloomy forest extended in every direction; but even now the employés of the Hudson's Bay Company, who are stationed in the interior of the vast territory, lead lonely, cheerless lives. In early days, it became their constant practice to form connections with the handsomest Indian females, and some of the wealthiest Canadians of the present day are descended from Indian ancestors on the female side.

The connection thus formed, however, not unfrequently led to evil, and sometimes to fatal, consequences. The Indian girls were often eager to attract the attention

and gain the favour of the white men, who could present them with cheap but glittering trinkets, and enable them to enhance their dusky charms with the finery, which is as much coveted by the Indian squaw as by her fair European sisters. The young Indians were frequently jealous of the partiality shown to the white men by the young maidens of their tribe; and this jealousy led to quarrels, and occasionally to more evil results. Worse than this, however, the white men, bound by no legal ties to the objects of their choice, often cast them adrift when they tired of them, and took others in their place. The tribe to which the injured squaw belonged sometimes took her part, and the most fearful consequences ensued—the offender being secretly massacred, no one could say by whom.

In a country where no laws existed save those of a man's own free will, and in which religion was utterly cast aside and forgotten, men's consciences soon became completely seared and hardened; morality and justice were alike disregarded; and so far as the former of these virtues was concerned, the European often sank far beneath the level of the Indian.

Sometimes, however, the white man proved faithful to the object of his first choice; and it was no uncommon sight to see an old retired servant of the Hudson's Bay Company living on affectionate terms with his Indian wife and his family of half-breed children—though the squaw, in nearly all such cases, refused to adopt the habits or costume of civilized society, and clung to the last to her blue blanket and scarlet leggings.

The old servants of the Hudson's Bay Company almost always grew rich. During their long exile from civilization they had no means of expending their salaries, which consequently accumulated in their hands. Moreover, they had many private opportunities of acquiring wealth, which they usually took advantage of; and when, finally, they retired from the service on pension, they continued, generally, to live a solitary existence for choice—seldom living up to their means.

From time to time, however, when these retired servants of the Company received a visit from some ancient comrade, it is said that it was their custom to drink deep, and to keep up their orgies throughout the night, and until daylight dawned

and found them frequently in a condition of helpless inebriety, lying senseless beneath the table, where they lay until they gradually recovered from their debauch. The peculiar habits of these men gave rise to strange stories concerning them, which were currently believed by the superstitious Canadians, who fancied that the old "Nor-west Men" had sold themselves to the evil one. It was said that imps and demons joined with them in their revels; and persons who passed near their houses while the carouses were going on declared that they heard strange, unearthly shouts, and fiendish peals of laughter, which were kept up until the approach of day.

When these old "Nor-west Men" died, their houses were often left untenanted until they began to fall into decay. There was almost invariably some quarrel among the heirs respecting the will, or the succession to the property, which consequently fell into the hands of the lawyers, who, having once got possession, held on to it as long as possible, or as long as there was anything to hold on to.

Thus it came about that, in course of time, the houses were believed to be haunted. Unaccountable noises were heard proceeding from them; and though these noises were, no doubt, occasioned by the owls, rats, bats, and other vermin which found refuge in them, and commenced their revels or their hunt after prey at nightfall, the simple Canadian habitants, and others who professed to disregard such superstitious fancies, and smiled with scornful pity at the ignorance of the habitants, were chary of passing near the deserted houses after darkness had set in.

There is hardly a district in Canada in which one of these so-called haunted houses is not to be found. There was one, a few years ago, near the city of Montreal; and, for aught I know to the contrary, the old house may still be in existence. But though I have passed by it at all hours, by night and by day, I cannot say that I have heard any strange noise proceeding from it, or that I ever saw anything calculated to cause me the least alarm.

While travelling through Upper Canada, some eight or nine years ago, I met, at the hotel in Guelph, a young Government surveyor, whom I will designate by the name of Markham.

The long, cold Canadian winter was just

beginning to set in, and Markham, consequently, was making preparations to start on a surveying expedition—surveying being necessarily only carried on during the winter, as it is impossible to live in the backwoods during the summer and autumn, by consequence of the malaria which exhales from the numerous swamps, and the swarms of mosquitoes and other venomous insects which infest the forests at those seasons; moreover, the swamps of themselves are sufficient to render surveying impracticable until they are frozen over.

The preparations necessary to be made by the leader of a surveying party are very numerous. It is astonishing what a number of assistants and labourers are required. There are the chain-bearers; the wood-cutters, to cut down trees to mark the boundaries, when the survey of a tract of land has been completed; the cook—sometimes more than one cook, when the party is unusually large; besides drivers and other labourers—all to be engaged for the season.

Then there are provisions to be supplied, and vehicles to carry the provisions, and the poles, canvas and cordage for the tents.

Besides all these, Markham had a sleigh, or cariole, of his own; and a man, whose duty it was to drive the sleigh, and act as a servant, and make himself generally useful.

Then there was the amount of wages to be paid each man to be settled; and I don't know what besides. However, all these matters were at length arranged, and Markham and his "gang" were to set forth on the expedition on the following Monday. It was now Tuesday; so the men had nearly a week during which to make their own little preparations—to purchase clothing, and tobacco, and other trifles, and to bid good-bye to their friends; for six months would elapse ere they would return to Guelph.

Markham was to commence operations near Lake Nepissing, at a spot several miles beyond any settlement. He and I had become, in a few days, very great friends, as usually cold and reserved Englishmen will do when they are thrown together, as we were, far distant from our native land, and near the extreme verge of civilization; and as I had a great desire to test the manner of living in the backwoods, I proposed to accompany the expedition to the lake, and spend a few weeks with the party.

Markham gladly acceded to my request, and frankly offered to share his own private tent with me, at the same time expressing his wish that I could remain with him throughout the winter.

"For I assure you," he added, "it's precious dull for a fellow to have no others but these Canadian chaps for his companions, for months together."

The "gang" set out on their long journey on the appointed day. Markham and I followed in the cariole the next morning, and overtook the party before night, when we camped down together till daylight, and then proceeded in company until we reached our destination.

It is not my purpose in this paper to describe a winter spent in the backwoods of America—a thing that has been done over and over again, ad nauseam. Suffice it to say that I spent a month very pleasantly at the camp. The weather was intensely cold—the thermometer ranging from fifteen degrees down to zero of Fahrenheit—but generally fine; and the tents were sufficiently warm and comfortable.

Markham, whenever the weather permitted, was busily occupied with his survey; but I had my gun with me, and I frequently brought in, after a few hours' stroll in the frost, a welcome addition to our supper in the shape of a hare, or a Canadian partridge, or some other kind of game.

Sunday was always a holiday with us. Markham and I sat reading in our tent, or took a stroll through the forest, and the men generally employed themselves in repairing their clothes, while they spun yarns to one another in Canadian French.

I think it was on the third Saturday evening, when, just before we turned into our hammocks for the night, Markham observed—

"I'll tell you what, J——, if the weather keeps fine and clear, I'd like to take a drive in the cariole to the head of the lake, to-morrow. There's a high cataract, and I've been told that the surrounding scenery is magnificent. Of course, we shall see it at a disadvantage in the winter; still, it is said to be grand and impressive at all seasons. What say you? Will you accompany me? We will set out soon after breakfast, and the back after nightfall—long before the men gave gone to roost."

Of course, I gladly consented to anything for a change; and two of the men were set

to clean out the cariole and brush up the harness, in readiness for the morrow.

The morning turned out to be fine, as usual. The frost was intense, but there was scarcely a breath of wind; and any degree of cold is endurable to a person well wrapped up, in calm weather.

As soon as we rose in the morning we set to work to provision ourselves for the day's journey. No ardent spirits are supplied to the men, either on a wood-cutting or surveying expedition, in the backwoods of Canada. It has been proved beyond doubt that they are in better health and able to do more work without any such stimulants; though a small stock of brandy is carried by the leader of the expedition for medicinal purposes. Tea and sugar, or molasses, are supplied in abundance, and tea is partaken of at every meal. Markham, however, in addition to the keg of spirits supplied by Government, carried a small private store of brandy, and various other little luxuries, for his own use.

There is a small, half-breed village, in the heart of the forest, between the spot where we were encamped and the south shore of the lake; and at this village—if we could find it—we intended to bait and rest our pony, and stop to dine; and as we should have to trespass upon the hospitality of the inhabitants of the place—the only village or settlement in existence, so far as was known, between our camp and the North Pole—we provided ourselves with a quantity of salt pork, and molasses, and tea, beyond what we could possibly require, that we might be enabled to repay the little hospitalities we expected to receive. Markham also stored a couple of bottles of cognac beneath the buffalo robes at the head of the sleigh, and we likewise carried with us a patent coffee warmer, so that we might be able to heat some water by means of burning spirits, if we should find it necessary.

We were in no great haste; and when at length everything was prepared for our journey, we sat down to breakfast.

Scarcely, however, had we taken our seats, when the distant jingle of sleigh bells was distinctly heard, ringing musically through the keen, clear, frosty air. The sound became more and more distinct, until, mingled with it, we could hear the tramp of horses' hoofs on the hard-frozen snow. We rose from our seats, and looked forth from the tent,

and soon saw a sleigh approaching the camp. Presently it arrived within hailing distance, and a cheery voice shouted—

"Camp ahoy! What camp is that?"

"Government surveying!" shouted Markham, in reply.

"I thought as much," returned the solitary occupant of the sleigh, which was now but a few yards distant. "I left the house on the shores of the Trading Lake (the last pretence of anything like a public-house between Lake Simcoe and Lake Nepissing) before daybreak this morning. I saw your smoke rising in the air, miles away; and when I sighted the camp, I suspected, from the whiteness of your tents, that you were a surveying, and not a wood-chopping party. I'm pretty sharp set by this time, though I breakfasted before I started; so I thought I'd stop and rest my pony, and take second breakfast with you, more comfortably than in the open sleigh."



THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER II.

THE SNOWSTORM IN THE BACKWOODS.

THE stranger was still speaking when he drew up, and sprang from his sleigh, opposite our tent.

He was a young, fair-haired, fresh-coloured, gentlemanly-looking fellow, with a frank, open expression of countenance that served in itself as a letter of introduction.

Of course, we gave him a hearty welcome, and invited him to join us at our breakfast table.

"Thank you," he replied. "I'm as hungry as a hunter, and I've a long day's journey yet before me. Stay, though, I'll

bring in my gun. I never care to leave that behind me in the sleigh when I stop;" and from beneath the buffalo robes he drew forth a handsome double-barrelled fowling-piece, and brought it into the tent with him.

Then, while he was divesting himself of the sealskin cloak in which he was wrapped, and of his otter-skin cap, and gauntlets of the same costly fur, which he wore drawn up to his elbows, he informed us that he was an officer—a lieutenant—belonging to the regiment stationed at Toronto.

"A party of our fellows," he continued, "together with two or three men belonging to the town, have gone on a hunting expedition to the Cedar Lake. They set out a week ago. I was to have been of the party; but I was detained four or five days on garrison duty, confound it! Now I'm going to join them. I expect to reach their camp before nightfall, or else I shall have to 'camp down' in the sleigh as best I may, unless I'm lucky enough to fall in with some hunter's cabin. However, I'm told it's only twenty-five miles to their camp from Lake Simcoe, and my pony's fresh. I dare say it'll be all right."

We acquainted the young officer that we were about to set out for Lake Nepissing, and Markham observed that for four or five miles we might travel in company.

"Be it so," said the lieutenant, whose name, as he informed us, was Hoptown. "But I branch off a few miles ahead, to the north-east, and your course lies due north-west, if I recollect the map aright. I travel by pocket compass," he added, laughing merrily; "and, as you perceive, I've been studying the courses over this waste of frozen snow, as carefully as a sailor does when he's navigating the ocean."

I inquired whether he had journeyed by himself all the way from Toronto.

"Every inch of the road," he replied. "You know, I might have travelled by rail from Toronto to Guelph, but I preferred to sleigh it. A sleigh, in my opinion, is so much pleasanter a conveyance than a cooped-up railway carriage."

We set forth immediately after breakfast, and kept together for about four miles, when our young friend cheerfully bade us good-bye, and set forth on his due north-east course.

We had nothing to guide us on our journey. The road, if it may be so termed, lay through a wide clearing in the

forest. The trees grew thickly on each side of the clearing, which displayed a wide surface of hard-frozen, dazzlingly white snow, amidst which, here and there, the black, charred stump of a tree (burnt, in order to destroy the roots, that they might rot in the ground) rose to the height of two or three feet, looking intensely black, dismal, and unsightly, in contrast with the pure white snow.

There was really no more perceptible road or path than is visible on the wide expanse of the Atlantic or Pacific oceans; and, as the young officer had intimated, we were guided on our path, like mariners, by the aid of the compass, or the position of the sun in the heavens. Our young friend was soon lost to view as we diverged more and more widely apart from each other, though his sleigh bells were still audible through the pure, clear, frosty atmosphere, when the sleigh itself was no longer to be seen.

"Now that is what I like to see," said Markham, when the officer's cariole was lost to sight behind the forest trees. "There goes a young fellow, travelling fearlessly over a tract that lies beyond the limits of civilization, and in a direction that would carry him to the North Pole—if he kept on long enough—without his meeting, in all probability, with a solitary habitation or a single human being throughout the journey; trusting confidently to his own courage and resources, and as certain in his own mind of reaching his destination in safety as though he were travelling over a turnpike road at home. Where will you see any other than an Englishman venturing alone on such a journey? A Frenchman, or a Spaniard, or German would have a companion with him, at least. Other people may be as brave as we Britons. I don't say they are not. But there are no other people upon earth so ready cheerfully to trust to their own resources, and even to feel a delight in meeting with and overcoming difficulties and dangers—— Hallo! What is the meaning of this?" he suddenly exclaimed, breaking off from his eulogy of his own countrymen. "Look ahead, my dear fellow. Did you ever see the like? After such a promising morning, too!"

I looked ahead in the direction to which he pointed—due north; and though I saw nothing that to my less experienced eyes appeared to be very alarming, I perceived

that a mass of dense black clouds was rising in the distant horizon, and threatening speedily to obscure the surrounding azure sky.

"We're going to have a snowstorm, and a severe one too," continued my companion, "or I'm no judge of the signs of the weather in this country. However, let us push on. I won't turn back before we have reached the end of our journey, if I can help it. I hate to be baulked of anything I've set my mind upon doing. The cloud appears stationary now. Possibly the storm may not reach us, after all, until the sun has passed the meridian; and in that case we shall have it on our backs in returning to the camp.

"I hope, though," he went on, after a brief pause, "that that young fellow who has just parted from us will take warning in time, and return to the camp. There is not even an Indian village on the route he is travelling; and if he gets caught in the storm, he has much less experience of Canadian winter weather than I have had. In fact, his regiment only came out last spring, and he's never yet passed a winter in Canada. He cannot possibly reach the Cedar Lake before the storm comes on, and if he gets caught in it I wouldn't give much for his chance of life; but you'll see, he won't turn back—not he—he'll just go on his way glorying in his contention with the warring elements, until it is too late to retreat."

There really did appear some prospect of the storm's holding back until the sun should begin to decline. The clouds, which had risen rapidly at first, appeared to be arrested in their further progress. The atmosphere was still calm, and the sky overhead continued perfectly clear.

"Let us push on," cried Markham. "It sha'n't be said that we were driven back before we reached the end of our journey, if I can prevent it, though we shall have but little time to look about us before we must return. Gee-ho! Well done, Cato! How he goes ahead—don't he—as if he knew our purpose;" and the hardy, spirited little pony did certainly dash along, over the hard-frozen snow, at a pace that would have done honour to a well-contested trotting match.

We had passed over several miles of ground, and a deep forest was before us, through which lay our path to the lake. In fact, we had nearly reached the forest when a sudden gust of wind nearly overset the

sleigh; and the clouds, black as jet and rolling one over another, rose rapidly ahead. A few large flakes of snow fell around, as *avant-coureurs* of the coming storm. Then came another heavy gust of wind, and the sky became suddenly obscured, as if by the effects of magic. There was a shuddering sound in the air, as though nature were trembling before the threatened tempest; and then, with a roar like thunder, the winds were let loose. The snow fell thick and fast, and was blown up in showers around us, almost blinding our eyes, and preventing us from seeing twenty yards ahead. The whole surface of the earth appeared to be in swift motion in the drifting snow—one might have fancied that we were amidst the foaming waves of the ocean—and the trees near us bent as though they would snap asunder beneath the fury of the blasts.

"Now for it," cried Markham. "We've got it in right good earnest. I did not expect it would come down upon us so suddenly. Good heavens! how the wind howls. We must reach the forest if we can, and find shelter while the storm is in its first fury. This cannot last long!"

With no little difficulty—for the wind, every now and then, caught the sleigh on one side or the other, and arrested its progress, threatening to upset both the vehicle and the pony together; and the blasts were so severe that, for the moment, they took away our breath—we at length gained the slight shelter of the forest, and drew up, in the hope that the first fury of the tempest would soon abate, and permit us to return, for we now gave up all hope of reaching the lake.

It was scarcely yet mid-day, though the dense pall of black clouds overhead rendered it almost as dark as night, and it was impossible for the keenest sight to penetrate the thick falling snow. The forest looked gloomy in the extreme; though the tall pine trees, rising within a few yards of each other, branchless to the height of twenty feet, preserved us from a peril sometimes to be dreaded, under similar circumstances, in a forest of deciduous trees, in which the frequent sudden fall of an aged trunk, borne down by the fury of the tempest, crushes everything beneath it as it comes, with a thundering crash, to the ground. Still, we were not altogether free from danger of this description, as we could discover from the frequent crash and fall of

heavy, lofty, rotten branches, that were caught by the wind.

It would, however, have been impossible to have made headway even before the storm, while the wind blew with such fury. Like a ship at sea, which dares not run before a violent gale for fear of being "pooped" by the waves, our sleigh would certainly have been blown over, unless we could have kept it directly before the wind, which would have been a most difficult and hopeless task. We therefore remained where we were.

A snowstorm in Canada is very different from a storm of the same kind in a milder climate. The snow does not fall in large, feathery flakes, floating slowly and gracefully to the ground, but in dense, minute particles, mingled with hail and sleet, which, when driven before a violent wind, prick the skin as with needles wherever it is exposed, blinding the eyes, and penetrating into every aperture in the dress. The traveller exposed to such a storm, in a country where there is no road, nor even the faintest track to guide his steps, is unable to keep the direction of his journey; and if, as in many parts of the far West, there is no shelter within many miles, his senses soon become bewildered; and if darkness overtake him, he has little chance of living through the night. The daylight too often finds him a frozen corpse, half-buried in the snow.

We remained in the sleigh (curled up beneath the buffalo robes, one of which we had thrown over our pony, which stood trembling with cold and fright) full two hours before the storm abated anything of its fury. At length the wind somewhat lessened, though it still blew violently.

"We must start now," said Markham, "or we shall have night upon us before we can reach any shelter. The half-breed village must be near this spot. If we can find that, we shall be safe. Otherwise, we must strive our utmost to get back to the camp."

In a few minutes we were again in motion. The gale still howled, raged, and roared with all the fury of a hurricane, and the snow still fell thick and fast. But there were occasional short lulls between the gusts of wind, which led us to hope that the force of the tempest was breaking. The wind was from the northward, and so far in our favour, as we calculated, that the camp lay very nearly due south from

the spot where we were. We judged, therefore, that we had but to keep the wind directly on our backs to steer a true course.

We accordingly set forth on our homeward journey, and, as we thought, made pretty good way, although we could not see twenty yards before us, when we were suddenly brought to a standstill by finding our further progress intercepted by a long line of forest, where we had expected to find open ground; while, to add to our distress, the short Canadian winter day was already drawing to a close, and darkness was coming on apace.

"Hallo!" cried Markham, "there's something wrong here. We've got out of our course somehow, and yet we've kept straight before the wind all the way."

We had a pocket compass with us—an instrument without which no one ventures to travel over unknown ground, in the backwoods of America. But, in order to set the compass, it is necessary to come to a standstill; and as this causes delay, we had disregarded it hitherto. Now, however, we were necessarily delayed; and, by the feeble light which yet remained, we set the compass, and found that, instead of heading to the south, as we expected, we had been travelling in a south-easterly direction.

"The wind must have changed to the north-west since we quitted our shelter," I remarked; but while we were still examining the compass, a heavy gust of wind came suddenly from the north-east, and shifted round almost to due east, and back again to north-west, ere it had hardly spent its force.

"I see how it is," said Markham. "Like fools, we've kept before the wind; and it's been shifting to and fro, all the while, from east to north-west, almost half round the compass—and we, of course, have kept continually changing our direction. Heaven knows where we've got to, and in another half-hour it will be pitch dark. Would to God we could fall in with the half-breed village, though I'm afraid we've passed it, long ago. If we could but see the lights from the cabins, I'd try to get back to it, in the teeth of the wind," he added, in a tone of voice that told how little hope he had of getting back to the camp, or of weathering through the night, without shelter.

We again put the sleigh in motion, and skirted along the edge of the forest, for at

least three miles, before we found an opening, and by this time it was almost perfectly dark.

However, the tempest had somewhat abated, and we carefully set the compass again, directed our course by it, and set off in a due south direction, only to find ourselves brought up, in less than half an hour, by another belt of forest.

The trees, however, grew pretty open, and we decided to try to force a path through the forest, rather than skirt it, we knew not for how great a distance, in a direction contrary to that in which we wished to proceed; but we had scarcely entered the forest when something loomed up before us amid the darkness, darker still, which something we soon discovered, to our great joy—for by this time we were almost benumbed by the intense cold—to be a large, though apparently dilapidated and deserted, dwelling-house.

"Thank Heaven! We'll find shelter here, at least," exclaimed Markham. "To tell you the truth," he added, "though I kept silent, I had almost begun to despair."

We drove up to the house, and shouted to discover whether it was inhabited or not, but we received no response to our cries.

"By the size of the place," said Markham, "it must be, I should imagine, one of the old deserted stations of the Nor'-west Fur Company. And now I think of it, I recollect to have heard that there was some such place back, northward from the camp. It has the reputation of being haunted, too, if I mistake not," he went on, with a smile; "but that reputation belongs to all these old places, and I dare say we shall find our shelter none the worse for it. I suspect that the evil spirits are chiefly owls, and bats, and rats, and such-like vermin."

We alighted from the sleigh, and, with some slight difficulty, amid the darkness, found what appeared to be the main entrance to the forsaken dwelling.

We ascended a short flight of crazy steps, formed apparently of loose stones, and found the door half open, and hanging by one hinge.

We had matches with us, and our first operation was to strike a light, and set fire to a splinter of the turpentine-fir, which blazed in half a minute, like a torch. We now perceived that we were in a large room, with a lofty ceiling of rafters, black with smoke and age.

There was no furniture of any kind in the room, save an iron pot, which still hung suspended over the ample hearth, beneath the wide chimney; but it was almost eaten through with rust, showing that it must have hung thus suspended for years. There was one large window, with heavy shutters. The window had once been glazed, but only a few triangular pieces of glass remained in the corners of the panes.

Our first care was to close the shutters, which were still in tolerably good condition, for the gusts of wind came in at the window in such force as almost to extinguish our torch. This done, we looked further around us. There was, however, little to see. In one corner of the vast apartment was a dilapidated wooden staircase, which led to the rooms above; but several of the stairs had altogether given way; and satisfied that the house was uninhabited, we did not, for the present, attempt to ascend the stairs. On one side of the room, there was also a range of deep shelves; but most of them had rotted from their fastenings, and fallen to the floor. The floor itself was boarded; but many of the boards were rotten, and it was necessary to be careful how we stepped, to avoid falling through in places where they had given way, and thus breaking our legs. Round about the hearth, however, which was formed of smooth, flat stones, the floor was still in pretty good condition.

Having satisfied our curiosity thus far, we brought in the buffalo robes from the sleigh, and unharnessing the pony, led him carefully up the steps into the house, and placed him in a corner, with the bag of oats and hay we had brought with us over his nose, and there left him to rest and feed.

Our next care was to light a fire, a matter of no great difficulty, for the broken stairs and shelves were as dry as tinder, and served admirably for firewood; and, moreover, there was an abundance of pine branches and splinters, blown down by the gale, which served us both for light and firing.

In half an hour we had made ourselves as comfortable as it was possible to be in such a place; and we then proceeded to spread forth the provisions we had brought with us in the sleigh, and to make ourselves some tea, by means of the coffee-warmer we had with us—melted snow serving in place of water. We had refrained from even tasting

the brandy until we found shelter, lest it should increase the feeling of torpidity caused by the intense cold; but we each swallowed a dram after we entered the house, and we now added a little more to our hot tea; and making a hearty meal of biscuit and salt pork—for the cold had sharpened our appetites—we began to feel tolerably comfortable, and to think of other things besides our own immediate requirements.

I expressed a hope that the young officer, from whom we had parted a few hours before, had reached his friends, or found some shelter from the storm.

"I fear not, poor fellow!" replied Markham. "As to reaching the Cedar Lake, in the face of such a storm, that is impossible; and I very much doubt if there is any shelter of any kind between here and the lake. If there should be a deserted hut, the chances are a hundred to one against his finding it. I fear," he added, with a shake of his head, "that we shall hear sad accounts of him."

"I wonder," he went on, after a pause, "how they get along at the camp. By George! if they got the storm as sudden and heavy as we had it, it must have levelled the tents to the earth before they knew what was the matter—"

"Hullo! What's that?"

This sudden interjection on Markham's part was occasioned by a strange, whirring, humming noise amongst the rafters above our heads; and the next moment, first one, then a second large bat, awakened from their winter torpor by the heat, and light, and smoke, fell headlong to the hearth, almost into the fire.

"A specimen of the ghosts which haunt these old, deserted houses," observed Markham, with a smile. "It's really annoying, though, to have the vermin tumbling about us in this fashion."

We now lit our pipes, having satisfied our hunger, and were preparing to arrange the buffalo robes in the most comfortable manner for our repose, when I suggested that, before we settled ourselves down for the night, we should, just for curiosity's sake, take a peep at the rooms upstairs.

Markham assented. And providing ourselves each with a fresh pine torch, we set forth on our survey of the forsaken dwelling.

THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER III.**THE DESERTED HOUSE IN THE FOREST.**

IN the first place, however, we surveyed the ground floor of the house, and found it to consist of two apartments, in addition to that which we occupied. Both were somewhat smaller than the front room (which looked out into the forest, the trees growing almost close to the window), and both were similarly destitute of furniture. The farthest in the rear had an earthen floor, and had probably been used merely as a lumber-room or wash-house.

We then ascended to the upper floor; though it was not without difficulty that we scaled the dilapidated staircase, which trembled beneath our weight, several of the supports being wanting, and some of the stairs fairly gave way when stepped upon.

We reached the upper floor, however, in safety, and found it to consist of two large apartments, both in somewhat better condition than the lower rooms, having apparently been used as drawing-rooms or best bed-rooms. They were also without furniture, save an old rusty stove in the

centre of each room, and a grate on each hearth. In the back upper room there was a large, long chest, having a most ominous, coffin-like appearance, which Markham said was like the chests in which it was the custom to stow away the furs purchased from the Indians and hunters; and there was a deep cupboard in each room, in which were suspended some articles of female attire, almost dropping to pieces with age. The front upper room had but one window, like the room beneath; but there were three good-sized windows in the back room, in which many of the panes of glass were still entire.

Another broken and rotten staircase led to the rooms in the upper storey; but we had seen enough to satisfy our curiosity, and did not carry our inspection any farther at that time.

Descending to the ground floor, we mixed ourselves another glass of brandy and water, and, relighting our pipes, gathered the buffalo robes around us, in front of the blazing fire; and but for the nuisance of the bats, which still kept whirring among the rafters, and occasionally falling to the floor around us, we should have felt quite comfortable.

By this time it was seven o'clock—too early for us to compose ourselves to sleep; and we therefore sat smoking and talking, and listening to the storm which raged without. It had somewhat abated after our arrival, but had now recommenced with fresh fury; and the howling and wailing of the wind as it swept among the forest trees, and the occasional snapping and crashing of rotten and falling branches, had a wild, weird sound, which might well have frightened any one inclined to superstitious fears.

As usually happens under such circumstances, our conversation turned upon the superstitious fancies which prevail among ignorant people; and Markham was repeating various stories of this kind that he had heard from the French Canadians, when, in a temporary lull of the storm, I fancied that I heard the distant jingle of sleigh bells.

"Can't be," said Markham, to whom I mentioned what I had heard—"travellers are few and far between in this part of the world, and it is not likely that any one save ourselves is abroad on such a night as this."

"Listen!" said I.

But a heavy gust of wind, which shook

the old house to its foundation, prevented anything else from being audible; and when it lulled again all was silent.

"One fancies one hears all sorts of sounds in the forest at night," said Markham; "especially during such a storm as this. I have often lain awake and fancied—"

"Hark! It *is* the sound of sleigh bells, by Jove! Who can be abroad on such a night? It may be the young fellow we parted with to-day. Pray Heaven it is! Though he may never be able to find us, if it is he. Those bells are miles away, and the sound is borne down to us on the wind."

"Let us go to the door and shout," said I.

"Useless," replied Markham. "Our united voices wouldn't be audible against the wind a hundred yards away."

Nevertheless, for lack of any other means to make our presence known to the benighted traveller, we did go to the door, and ventured out into the storm, standing knee-deep in the snow, and shouting with all our might, though we knew perfectly well that the wind carried the sound of our voices in the opposite direction.

"Listen! I don't hear it now," said Markham. "It was most likely fancy, after all."

All did appear to be silent, except the howling of the storm, and we were about to close the door again, when the sound was heard more distinctly than before.

"It is certainly the jingle of sleigh bells," said Markham; "and coming nearer and nearer, too, though our shouts must have been inaudible to the traveller, whoever he may be. He's a mile and more away yet. I've learnt to judge of distance by sound during my experience in the backwoods; but he's coming directly towards us."

"Let us show a light," said I.

"No light that we can show would be discernible through this mist of falling snow," replied Markham. "It would require a perfect illumination to be visible any distance off. Listen! the sleigh is certainly coming nearer and nearer."

There was no doubt of this; for, though more than half an hour elapsed before we heard the tramp of the horse's hoofs on the hard-frozen ground in those spots from which the wind drifted the falling snow—so great was the distance of the traveller

from us—the sound of the bells grew more distinct every minute; and at length we distinguished the shouting of a human voice mingling with other sounds.

We now again shouted, hoping that our voices might be heard; and our shouts were responded to.

"Whoever he is," said Markham, "I fear it is not the poor young fellow who breakfasted with us this morning. It's some one evidently who knows the country well, and who has been making' directly for this spot ever since you first heard the bells."

He had scarcely spoken ere the traveller drew near enough for us to distinguish his voice and words—

"Thank God that I've got amongst human beings once more!" he cried. "I'd fairly given myself up for lost."

"Surely," said I, "that's Lieutenant Hoptown's voice!"

"It does sound like it," replied Markham. "But we shall soon know. Here he is."

The stranger drew up as he spoke, and by the light of the pine torch I carried, we saw that it really was our young companion of the morning.

"Hoptown, my dear fellow, welcome with all my heart and soul!" exclaimed Markham. "We have been speaking of you a dozen times since the storm set in, and you've hardly ever been absent from my thoughts. I had given you over for lost. Thank Heaven that you've been so fortunate as to light upon us thus!"

"Give me a hand out of the sleigh, please," said the young officer. "I am so stiff with cold that I've all but lost the use of my limbs. I can't feel the reins. The horse has guided himself. He must have seen your lights as well as I, and made for them of his own accord, otherwise I could never have guided him hither."

We scarcely took notice of this speech at the moment. It actually required both of us to lift the young man from the sleigh; another ten minutes' exposure to the intense frost, and all would have been over with him. In his desperate anxiety to make himself heard, he had raised his voice in shouts; but his speech, now that the dread and excitement were over, was hardly intelligible. I saw, by the torchlight, that the tip of his nose was already white, and in danger of being frost-bitten—if, indeed, it was not so already—and I caught up a handful of snow and rubbed his face with

all my might. Happily, sensation speedily returned to him, and I was soon relieved from anxiety on that point. After his limbs had been well rubbed, the blood again circulated freely through his veins, and we permitted him to approach the fire, from which we had hitherto kept him at a distance.

A tin cup of hot brandy and water completed the cure, and he was able to feel the comforts of his new position.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I've had a narrow escape from being frozen to death."

"Narrow, indeed," replied Markham. "Ten minutes more, and you would have found shelter too late. But tell me, how came you to make for this place? You could have known nothing of its existence; it was, in fact, unknown to me, who have been in the country for years, until we stumbled upon it by mere chance to-night, just after darkness set in."

"I never should have found it but for your lights, and I believe my pony saw the lights as well as I," answered the young officer, almost repeating the words he had previously spoken. "Even then," he went on, "I little thought to meet you here, nor to find such a place as this. I thought I was approaching some large, regularly inhabited dwelling, not a deserted, dilapidated house in the wilderness."

"But you speak of our lights," said Markham; "you could not have seen our lights, for we showed none on the windward side of the house. Nor had we any to show that could have been of any service—nothing more than one of these pine torches, which, even if it had not been immediately extinguished by the wind, would have appeared but as a mere will-o'-the-wisp through the falling snow."

"I saw your lights through the windows, distinctly, three or four miles off," replied the lieutenant.

"Through the *windows*, my dear fellow," continued Markham, "impossible! In the first place there is, as you see, but one glassless window in this room; and the shutters, as you also perceive, are tightly closed, to exclude the wind and snow. Then, though I doubt very much whether the reflection of our fire through a glazed window—supposing that window to have been glazed, and the shutters open—so low as this window is could be seen a mile off, let alone three or four miles, it certainly could not

have been seen by you, approaching the house from the northward, since, as you perceive, it looks in exactly the opposite direction, and is shaded by the forest. No lights could be seen far away through the trees."

"I see that you are jesting with me, for some reason or other, though I don't see where the joke lies," replied the lieutenant, testily. "I saw no lights from the window of this room, but from three upper windows in the rear of the house, as I now perceive. I saw figures moving to and fro. It appeared to me that there were a dozen at least, dancing, as I thought, amidst a blaze of light, which fairly illumined the surrounding landscape. By Jove! I fully expected to find that some merrymaking was going on—a wedding celebration, or something of the kind; and I can swear that I saw females, or, at all events, I can swear that I saw one figure in female attire. I certainly was surprised when you so suddenly extinguished the lights, just as I came within hailing distance."

Both Markham and I protested firmly and distinctly that we had shown no lights from the rear of the house, and that it was impossible that the windows could have been lighted up.

The lieutenant, however, persisted in saying that we were jesting with him.

"You acknowledge," he said, "that there are three windows in the upper room in the rear of the house?"

Markham and I acknowledged that such was the case.

"Then how should I know that?" continued the lieutenant. "Do you still persist in asserting that that room with the three windows was not brilliantly lighted, and that you did not move swiftly to and fro—one of you attired as a female; though it appeared to me that there were a dozen persons in the room, at least? Were not you dancing, or engaged in some such amusement; and when I came near, after I had hailed you for the first time, did you not instantaneously extinguish the lights—leaving the place in what appeared to me, by the sudden and violent contrast, Egyptian darkness?"

Once more we solemnly asserted that we knew nothing of any lights such as those of which he spoke, and that we had only been in the room a few moments, immediately after our arrival at the house.

The young officer appeared at length to be convinced that we spoke in earnest.

"Then," said he, "I am either drunk or mad, or I have seen this night the strangest and most unaccountable sight I ever beheld!"

We endeavoured, but uselessly, to persuade him that he had been deceived by some illusion; that he had probably seen a will-o'-the-wisp, or jack-o'-lantern, or whatever term the Canadians apply to the marsh lights.

"Marsh lights, when the marshes are frozen over and deeply covered with snow!" he answered, derisively. "New as I am to Canada, you can't persuade me to that. No; illusion or no illusion, I saw what I have described to you, as distinctly as I see you now before me. I beheld the lights for an hour, at least. I was miles away when I first saw them; and they continued, as I have said, until I was close to the house. Then they were quenched as suddenly as gas can be turned off. I am not superstitiously inclined—I laugh at such follies; but I repeat that I saw figures pass and re-pass in rapid motion, and that there was at least one female figure among them. I was so near when the lights were extinguished, that if any one of the figures had stood still, facing the windows, I could plainly have distinguished its features.

"If, as you assert, it were mere fancy on my part, how came I, an utter stranger until to-day to this part of the country, to have made directly for this house, of the existence of which I was ignorant? How came I to know that there are three windows in the upper back room?"

The questions did not admit of reply. Nevertheless, to satisfy our guest—as I may term the lieutenant—and to convince him, and ourselves also, that we were the only occupants of the dwelling, we resolved to search all the rooms we could find in the upper portion of the house.

We therefore each provided ourselves with a lighted pine torch, and ascended the broken, rickety stairs, to the upper floor, one after another, keeping as close together as possible; for though our reason forbade us to place any faith in the marvellous stories relative to houses of this description, prevalent among the French Canadian habitants, and believed in firmly by them, and by many others who profess to disavow such superstitious fancies, we

could not help feeling an indescribable sensation of awe, as though we were surrounded by mystery, though we would have been ashamed to confess to any such feeling.

The rooms, however, as Markham and I felt assured of beforehand, were empty, as we had previously seen them, and in utter darkness, until lighted by the torches we carried.

The young officer gazed out of the windows into the surrounding darkness, and moved swiftly to and fro, to illustrate the movements of the figures or shadows he had beheld. Markham raised the heavy lid of the chest heretofore alluded to, and I narrowly searched the cupboards. Everything was as when we left the rooms, after our previous cursory examination; but the bottom of the chest, which had not previously been opened, was stained by some dark liquid, which appeared to have soaked into the wood until it had become completely absorbed, and which a superstitious person might have declared to be blood, but which, for aught we knew, might have been anything else—perhaps nothing more than the moisture which had, at some time long gone by, evaporated from fresh fur skins, left to remain a long time in the chest.

We then ascended, with much difficulty and some peril to our limbs, to the storey above, which consisted of two rooms, precisely similar to those beneath, save that the ceilings were not pitched so high.

These rooms were entirely devoid of furniture; but the cupboards, similar to those below, were absolutely filled with articles of male and female wearing apparel, all apparently rotting with damp and age; for the various garments appeared to have been but little worn, and some of the feminine apparel was of silk and of other costly material.

From this storey we mounted, by means of a broken ladder, through an open trap-door, to a loft with a low arched roof, beneath which, save in the centre, it was impossible for any one of us to stand erect. The floor of this room was strewn with rotten fragments of skins, from which the fur had almost completely disappeared. The stench arising from these fragments was noisome in the extreme; and as nothing else was to be seen in the room, we were glad to escape from it.

As we were again descending to the ground floor, Markham struck his foot against something lying near the chest, which proved to be a small, but heavy-headed hammer, with long and crooked claws.

This hammer must have lain where we found it while we were searching the room during our ascent, though it seemed strange that we did not previously perceive it; and now, on examining it narrowly by torchlight, we saw that the head was crusted with rust, of a deep red colour, and that a similar rust adhered to the claws, for the length of half an inch from their sharp points.

We descended to the ground floor, heaped our fire with fresh fuel, and arranged the buffalo robes, from the two sleighs, in such a manner as to form as soft and warm a couch for the three of us as we could have desired; and, having once more made some hot tea, slightly flavoured with brandy, of which grateful beverage we all partook in moderation, we refilled and relit our pipes, and reclining on our furry couch, arranged ourselves to smoke and chat in comfort until we should fall fast asleep. Previous to this, however, we looked abroad upon the weather. The snow had almost ceased to fall, and the moon was now and then seen faintly shining, as though she were endeavouring to struggle through the clouds which passed rapidly across her disc—a heavy, dark cloud sometimes completely obscuring her for a few moments, and causing the utter darkness which came over the landscape at such times, to contrast vividly with the previous light. There was every appearance of the weather clearing up before daylight; but the wind raged as furiously as ever, and some of the heaviest squalls seemed to rock the old house to its very foundation.

It was still early—not yet ten o'clock; and, reclining luxuriously on our robes, we rejoiced in the consciousness of security, and shelter from the storm that raged so wildly without, and felt more inclined to talk than to sleep.

Our conversation, naturally enough, under the circumstances, still harped upon the superstitions which prevailed amongst the French habitans; and, from speaking of these, we reverted to other superstitions, ancient and modern, which prevailed in other lands.

THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HALF-BREED INDIAN VILLAGE.

EACH one of us had some story to tell of what he had heard, on professedly good authority, in the course of his travels—for we had all travelled, more or less, in different countries, though none of us could say that we had ourselves seen anything that was not capable of explanation, with the exception of the strange illumination which the young officer had witnessed that evening, which we in vain puzzled our brains to account for satisfactorily; though, with the exception of the lieutenant himself, we each advanced several unsatisfactory theories in our endeavours to explain it. Lieutenant Hoptown, however, persisted in



declaring that he had actually and literally beheld what he had described to us.

At length, one after another, though almost at the same moment, we dropped off into a state of unconsciousness; and I must have slept soundly for two hours or more, when I was awakened by what I fancied to have been a loud scream of terror, in a female voice. I was shivering with cold, for the buffalo robe I had thrown over me had become displaced, and the fire was burning low. I looked around upon my two companions, who appeared to be sleeping soundly, well wrapped up in their furs. We had provided ourselves with a large store of firewood, consisting chiefly of the broken stairs and shelves, intermixed with pine branches, which we had piled up near the hearth; with the understanding that any one who woke, and saw that the fire needed replenishing, was to heap on more fuel without disturbing the others. This I did, until the blaze flamed up brightly, and bending over it, I warmed myself thoroughly; and then, drawing the buffalo robe over me, tried again to compose myself to sleep. I could not, however, fall asleep immediately, and I lay listening to the howling of the wind, and the snapping of branches and limbs of trees, and all the various strange, unaccountable sounds that came from the forest. It was these sounds, I believed, which I, half awakened by the cold, had fancied to be a scream of terror; and chancing to look towards the shutters, I perceived a light streaming through the chinks, which I at first mistook for daylight. Wondering that the night had sped so swiftly, I consulted my watch, and found that it was only half an hour past midnight; and a second glance at the shutters convinced me that the light I saw streaming through the chinks was that of the moon, and that the sky had cleared, as it had bade fair to do before we slept. I lay half dozing off, and waking up again, for some time. The moonbeams glanced across the wide room, and lit up the dark corners of the broken staircase, and while watching this stream of light I again fell asleep; but I had scarcely lost consciousness, when I heard the scream repeated in a tone that seemed to curdle my blood with horror. It was followed by a sound of mocking laughter still more horrible to hear; and, starting up in terror, I saw distinctly a tall, slender female form, clothed apparently in a long, white, almost transparent

garment, glide along at the head of the staircase, just where the moonbeams shone most brightly, and suddenly disappear.

I suppose that I gave utterance to some exclamation of terror or surprise, for Markham suddenly sprang up into a sitting posture, his face pale with affright.

"You heard the scream, then?" he cried. "'Tis the second time to-night! But did you see that ghostly figure glide by?"

I knew Markham to be as brave a fellow as ever lived, and I was astonished at the terror he manifested.

"I thought you were sound asleep," I replied—glad, however, to find one of my companions awake.

"No," replied Markham. "Twice have I heard that fearful cry. The first time I thought I had dreamed. I heard you rise and replenish the fire; but, to tell the truth, as you did not speak, I felt ashamed to mention what I fancied to be a horrid dream, caused by our conversation this evening before we slept. But I have not slept since, though I kept silent until I heard your exclamation. I heard the screams, and I fancied that I saw a female form in white flit by, at the head of the staircase. And that horrible laugh! It was not human. It sounded like the mockery of fiends!"

"Look at the ponies," I interrupted. "Could the noise have come from them?"

We had brought Hoptown's pony into the room, and placed the animal in a corner, beside our own. They had both been lying down, perfectly quiet, but now they had risen, and were visibly trembling in every limb; and, on approaching them, we found them covered with perspiration. They appeared to be somewhat relieved from their manifest terror by our approach, and whinnied, and rubbed their heads against our shoulders, as if appealing to us for protection.

"By Jove! this is too much of a good thing!" exclaimed Markham. "I wonder," he added, "whether Hoptown is asleep?"

I called the lieutenant by name, and Markham did so likewise. But he did not stir until I gently pulled aside the buffalo robe which covered him. Then he sprang up into a sitting posture, and rubbed his eyes, and yawned, as if he were suddenly awakened from sleep. But his pale face, and the furtive, half-frightened glance he cast at the head of the staircase—towards

which his face had been turned as he lay—convinced me that he had both heard and seen what he perhaps felt ashamed to acknowledge.

In the woods, at the dead of night, strange sounds, proceeding from night birds and wild animals prowling about in search of their prey, and from the snapping and falling of rotten twigs and branches, are heard in the calmest weather. Now, however, these ordinary night sounds were silenced or overpowered by the howling of the wind and the wild tumult of the storm, and within the house all was perfectly still. We listened for some moments without exchanging a word. Then I asked Hoptown, who had also risen to his feet, whether he had been disturbed.

"To confess the truth, yes," he replied. "In fact, I have scarcely slept. I lay awake for some time after you fellows had fallen asleep, thinking of the strange beacon lights which guided me to this shelter, and was just dozing off when I fancied I heard footsteps overhead. However, I supposed the sound to come from some rats, or bats, or some other vermin that infest such ruins as this, and was again dozing off when I was startled by a cry that sounded to my ears like the shriek of a mortally wounded horse. I have heard such shrieks, many a time, in the Crimea. Presently the cry was repeated, but with a more human sound. I heard you rise, and put wood on the fire; but as you did not speak, I was ashamed to mention what I had heard—especially after the affair of the lights—lest you should think me a cowardly, superstitious fool. So I tried to sleep again, and was, as I believe, dropping off, when I heard the cry repeated, and saw what appeared to me to be a transparent female figure, glide past at the head of the stairs—"

"And that sound, as of mocking laughter?" said I.

"Yes. But are you sure," continued the lieutenant, "that that wasn't caused by the horses?"

"Yes," said Markham. "It seemed to come from the room above."

"And the ponies were trembling, and perspiring with terror," I put in.

"What we have all heard and seen alike cannot be mere fancy," said Hoptown. "Perhaps you'll believe that I really beheld the lights in the upper floor now?"

"We never doubted your word, my dear

fellow," replied Markham; "though we thought it must have been some illusion."

"And all the rest is illusion, I suppose?" continued the lieutenant. "I only know," he added, "that I would sooner face a loaded battery than be subject to such illusions. I like to know what I have really got to contend against."

"All is quiet now, at all events," said Markham. "It is strange—most unaccountable," he went on, after a pause; "but it may be possible that we have all been dreaming. Dreams are sometimes so vivid as to appear like reality; and, you know, we were talking of such superstitions before we fell asleep."

"And all dreamt the same thing; and I was dreaming, I suppose, when the lights guided me to this place?" said the lieutenant, ironically.

"And the ponies, too," said I.

"I don't know what to make of it," replied Markham.

"Except that it's deuced unpleasant, to say the least of it," added Hoptown.

We had again seated ourselves on our buffalo robes around the fire, and I was forming a pillow for my head, when Hoptown suddenly cried—

"Listen! Are we dreaming now?"

"I hear nothing but the wind," said I.

"It's the wind shaking the shutters," added Markham.

"Is it?" continued Hoptown. "The shutters are overhead, then. Hark! It's as regular as clockwork. Is *that* the wind?"

We all listened attentively. The sound was faint—scarcely audible at first, amidst the howling of the wind, which seemed to have increased since the sky had cleared, and the snowfall had ceased. It gradually became louder and more distinct, however, appearing to come from the back room on the upper floor, in which was the long, narrow chest I have described. The sound was like that made by a coffin-maker hammering nails into the lid of a coffin. There came three or four quick, sharp, clinking taps—tap, tap, tap. Then a brief interval of silence. Then tap, tap, tap—tap, tap, tap, tap—tap, tap, tap—and so on, regularly and without intermission. It was horrible to listen to. I felt as though the blood were curdling in my veins; and for some minutes we listened silently, looking at one another, but seemingly unable to speak.

Hoptown was the first to break the spell—

"By heaven!" he exclaimed, "this is too horrible! If it comes from living being, I'll find out who he is, at all hazards."

He sprang to his feet as he spoke, and seizing his gun, moved towards the staircase.

"Stay," cried Markham, "let us all go together. There may be people concealed in the house, though we have searched it thoroughly, who have got up this plot in order to frighten us, and drive us away."

Markham and I had brought our guns in the sleigh with us, to be prepared for a chance shot, though we had had no occasion to use them.

In case the powder might be damped by the snow, we all three withdrew the charges, loaded afresh, and fitted on new caps; and, thus armed, proceeded to mount the broken, rickety staircase, one immediately after the other.

Not that our guns could have been of any real service to us; for a party of determined men, resolved not to be taken by surprise, might have hurled us, one after another, from the head of the stairs to the bottom without meeting with any resistance on our part; for we needed to hold on with both hands to raise ourselves, in places where the stairs had altogether fallen away. But we instinctively felt safer thus armed.

However, we met with no interruption. The raps continued as we slowly mounted the stairs—one of which gave way beneath the weight of Markham, who was the hindmost, and fell clattering to the floor beneath. There was a momentary cessation of the sound, as if the operator had stopped to listen to the noise made by the falling stair. Then it went on again, regularly as before.

We gained the upper floor, and stood still a few moments to listen to any movement that might be made. Still the rapping went on, and continued until, lightly and slowly, in our stocking feet, we had nearly crossed the front room, when it ceased so suddenly as to startle us. We again stopped, and listened in silence; but no movement was audible, and together we stepped briskly into the back room.

It was empty and silent, exactly as we had left it after our former survey of the interior of the house. The long, narrow chest—which, to our fancy, looked more like a coffin than ever—was in the same position as before.

We advanced towards it, and raised the lid; looked out of the window into the now clear but windy night, and watched the clouds driven rapidly across the sky, and the deep shadows cast upon the snow by the trees, beneath the bright moonlight, temporarily disappearing as the moon was momentarily obscured by some passing cloud, and then again stretching in fantastic shapes across the broad, glittering expanse of snow. The black stumps of the felled trees heretofore alluded to—now distinctly visible in the moonlight, and disappearing in the quickly passing darkness, to reappear the next instant—looked like fantastic living figures moving to and fro; and so wild and weird and drear appeared the landscape, that for the moment, while gazing admiringly upon it, we forgot our present purpose. However, it was soon recalled to our minds, and we shouted aloud, and called for any one present to answer.

No reply came but the wild howling of the wind, and the rushing noise it made as it swept over the bending forest trees; and we ascended to the second storey, only to find everything as we had left it a few hours before. We thought it useless to proceed to the loft, so we returned to the room below, thoroughly chilled with cold, and no better satisfied than we were before we set forth.

Once more replenishing the fire, we resumed our places before it, though with little thought of sleep.

"It is marvellously strange," said Markham; "but, at all events, our survey seems to have put a stop to that horrid tapping, which was enough to drive one crazy."

"The ponies seem all right now," said Hoptown. The animals were lying down quietly in their corner. "How strange it is that they should have been so terrified."

"Well," continued Markham, striving after a grim joke, "since we have managed to lay the ghost, I suggest that we comfort ourselves with another pannikin of hot grog. I feel chilled to the very marrow."

"Agreed," exclaimed Hoptown and I, together.

And the coffee warmer, which had already done us so much good service, was again called into requisition.

Scarcely, however, had Markham lighted the spirit lamp beneath the warmer, ere—rap, rap, rap—tap, tap, tap, came from the back room above: low at first, and growing

louder and more distinct as it proceeded—exactly as we had heard it before.

We stared at one another in a species of ludicrous dismay.

"Well, upon my soul, this is too bad!" exclaimed Hoptown. "What is to be done?"

"Nothing that I can conceive," replied Markham. "It's horrible to hear, and that's a fact. But we must just grin and bear it. We can't help ourselves."

"It would be useless to search the rooms again," said I.

"I suspect so. At all events, I shall not stir," replied Markham.

"I have heard of insects making some such noise in decayed wood," I observed. "There is plenty of rotten wood in this old house. Can that explain the mystery?"

"No," replied Markham; "I have heard the ticking noise to which you allude, hundreds of times. Superstitious people at home call it the death watch; but it's no more like this noise than a penny whistle is like a trumpet in sound. Hark! you may hear the clink of the hammer, as upon some metallic substance, as plainly as possible. No insect ever made such a noise as that. Besides, can you account for it ceasing when the stair fell; and stopping altogether when we drew near the room, though we trod noiselessly? And, then, the other sounds we have heard, and the things we have seen! The lights, and the female forms!"

"How can you account for them?" said I.

"Ah!" replied Markham. "That's the question. I can't account for them. So let us drink our grog while it is hot."

We shouted aloud, however; but to no purpose, so far as the rapping was concerned. So, crouching before the fire, we lit our pipes and sipped the hot brandy and water, and made the best of our unpleasant position.

After continuing with unbroken regularity for another hour at least, the noise suddenly ceased. I looked at my watch. It was just ten minutes past two o'clock. The wind now began to lull. The loud gusts, which had seemed to shake the crazy old house to its foundation, were no longer heard; and the silence that ensued, within and without, after the previous disturbances, was startling in its effect. I had not expected to sleep again that night, but there were nearly six hours yet before daylight; and gradually, as I sat watching the fire, I felt my eyelids grow heavy, forgetfulness intervened, and I

slept, and slept soundly, as did my companions also, until daybreak.

We awoke shivering with cold, for the fire had gone out while we slept. The wind had entirely ceased, and the rays of the cold, wintry sun shone brightly through the chinks in the shutters.

We threw the shutters open, and looked abroad. The sky was almost without a cloud; but the cold was intense, for though the sun shone brightly it seemed to give no heat, and the snow lay unthawed beneath its brightest rays. Save for the snowdrifts, and the twigs and branches of trees that lay scattered profusely around, there were no signs of the furious storm of the previous day.

The room seemed more dismal in the daylight than it had looked by torch and firelight on the previous evening, and our first care was to relight the fire and warm ourselves thoroughly; our second, to provide breakfast, for which we had enough provisions yet remaining. As we sat at our meal, we talked over the events of the past evening and night; but though we spoke lightly of what we had seen and heard, it remained utterly inexplicable to us, unless we had been willing—which we were not—to explain it by charging it to some supernatural agency. Before we re-entered our sleighs, we took another survey of the rooms immediately above, but discovered nothing that could account for the strange sights and sounds that had been manifested to us.

It was evident enough that a very great many years had elapsed since the house had been tenanted, and that it had been one of the stations of the great Fur Company was shown by the rotten remnants of fur skins that strewed the upper loft. Also, that it had once had female inhabitants was apparent from the remnants of once valuable and costly female garments that had become rotten with age; and it certainly seemed strange and unaccountable that these articles of female apparel, so much coveted by the Indians and half-breeds, should have been thus left to rot with damp and age, unless there were some urgent reasons which forbade these people to appropriate to themselves articles which appeared to have been left without an owner, and which they are generally so eager to carry off.

We judged ourselves to be some twelve or fifteen miles from the camp; but we had strayed, in the storm and darkness, far out

of our path, and it was necessary, in the first place, to get into the proper route. Our companion, the young lieutenant, expressed his intention to go forward in search of his friends at the Cedar Lake; but as he was less familiar with the country than Markham, it was settled that he should keep by us until we found the regular road.

For some two or three miles we skirted the forest without finding the opening we sought, until we suddenly heard the loud barking of dogs, and, proceeding a short distance farther, saw the smoke from numerous huts, or cottages, rising in spiral columns above the trees until it mingled with the clear, early-morning atmosphere.

"The half-breed village, by Jove!" exclaimed Markham, "that at one time yesterday I would gladly have given a hundred dollars to have discovered."

Before long we heard the hum of human voices, and in a few moments came in sight of several groups of cabins, arranged without any apparent order or regularity on the outskirts of the forest.

"These people will be able to put us in the right road," said Markham, "and we'll stop here to second breakfast if they have anything to give us to eat; for we had but short commons this morning, and I, for my part, feel as hungry as a hunter already."

We were all in much the same condition, and driving up to one of the largest and best cabins, we inquired whether they could give us breakfast. An old lady, who professed to be a pure French Canadienne, replied in the French patois used by the habitants and half-breeds alike, and politely begging us to alight, she quickly set before us some newly baked damper (cakes of wheaten flour made without yeast, and baked in the wood ashes) and fresh butter, and set to work to fry some fish fresh from the lake. We asked her to make us some tea, and gave her for herself all the tea, half a pound or more, that we had left.

The old lady was very chatty. She seemed curious to learn what had brought us to the village, spoke of the furious snow-storm of the previous day, and observed that it was seldom strangers came to the place.

Markham told her that we had been caught in the storm of the day before, and must have perished had we not come across a large deserted house in the forest, two or

three miles distant, in which we had spent the night.

Up to this moment the old dame had been chatting in a lively manner, as also had a number of Canadians, half-breeds, and Indians, who had come to look at the strangers, and who stood watching us as we ate our breakfast; but as soon as Markham mentioned the deserted house, she crossed herself devoutly, as did several of the lookers-on, and muttered some prayers or charms, while she gazed upon us as though she were doubtful whether we were what we appeared to be, and whether our visit did not forbode evil to her house, and to the village.

As Markham, however, proceeded to state that we had passed but a bad night in the deserted house, and would be glad to get safe back to our camp again, she seemed to become somewhat reassured; and, after addressing her neighbours in a patois so mixed up with Indian words that it was almost utterly unintelligible to us, and receiving answers in a similar dialect, she again addressed us in Canadian French, and asked whether messieurs had not seen something terrible.

We replied that we had heard strange noises that were inexplicable to us, and that one of the party had seen the upper windows apparently brilliantly illumined.

Again she crossed herself devoutly, and exclaimed—

"Ah, c'est horrible! C'est affreux! Thank God and the Holy Virgin, messieurs, that you got away in safety."

Markham requested her to tell what there was so terrible about the deserted house, and why it had such a bad name with the people of the village; and perceiving that she hesitated, he slipped half a dollar into her hand.

THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER V.

VILLAGE LEGENDS.

"A H, m'sieurs," said the old lady, "it is a story of a long time past—long before I was born, and before this village existed; before there was any town or settlement between the woods and the great lakes. But so terrible a crime was committed at that distant day that the house was accursed by Heaven, and given over to the evil one, who has held possession of it ever since; and whom not even the good priests can banish from it by their prayers.

"At that time—long, long ago," she continued, "the great Company from across the seas, who employed hundreds of men to hunt after furs in the forests, from here, so far away"—sweeping her arm round from the north to the north-west—"to where the frost is eternal, had houses called stations in the woods, to which the hunters and trappers could bring the skins they had collected, to sell to men appointed by the Company to purchase them and store them up till they could be sent away.

"Many of these men, living alone for months and years, seeing no women of their race, but only Indian squaws, took to drinking, and became very wicked. When they met together, at long intervals, they held wild orgies for weeks together, until at length"—again she crossed herself—"they denied both the good God and the devil, and cared not what they did. They seized upon the prettiest young squaws and half-breeds, and enticed or carried others off from their lovers and husbands, and put no constraint upon their wickedness, until they became very

demons in human form themselves; though sometimes the Indians and half-breeds rose up against them, and then there was bloodshed and massacre, and they met with the punishment they deserved at the hands of those whom they had wronged, for they were beyond the reach of the law.

"Among the wildest and worst of these men was one MacSteven; though people said he had some good qualities, and was kind and gentle and generous when he first came from his own far-away country to settle in the woods, before he gave himself up to drink, and cast away all restraint upon his evil passions.

"He was a handsome man, and he grew rich, as most of these men did, in course of years; and, by one means or another, he enticed away, or carried off by force, every woman to whom he took a fancy; and it was told of him that he shot dead a young Indian who came to seek the mistress he had enticed away from him, and also a half-breed hunter, whose wife he had carried off. And everybody at last became afraid of him, for it was believed that he was in league with the evil one.

"Still, all this time, he was a favourite among his own people, who liked him for his courage and generosity and hospitality; and, from time to time, they came in large parties to his house, to hold revels with him for days together.

"What became of the women he enticed or carried off, when he grew tired of them, none could say; but people had their own thoughts on the matter. At length, however, he brought to his home in the woods the most beautiful half-Indian girl in all the country round. Her name was Louise; and those who had seen her said there were few women among the white people who were so handsome as she. And Louise, it was said, was as attached to him as he was to her; and, though she lived alone in the woods with him, he bought her everything she wished for, and cared not how much money he expended upon her. She had dresses and jewels fit for a queen, though she had no one to show them to; but she found pleasure in dressing herself in these rich garments, though there was seldom any save himself to see her.

"Still Louise and he quarrelled terribly at times, and people said there would be murder some day; for he was jealous of her Indian and half-breed friends, who came to

see her; and Louise was proud, and passionate, and fond of being admired, and often complained of being shut up in the woods, and besought him to take her with him when he went to the towns and settlements, as he did usually once or twice in the year. He was jealous, too, of the admiration Louise received from his own people when they came to visit him; and some said he had good reason for this jealousy, and others that he had no reason whatever. The good God only knows! The truth will be never known on earth."

And again the old lady crossed herself devoutly, and murmured a short prayer.

At length, m'sieurs," continued the old lady, "the terrible crime was committed that had been so long anticipated.

"It was winter time, soon after Christmas—just about the same season as this, only it happened so many long years ago.

"Ah, m'sieurs, it was a frightful deed—affreux—horrible! No marvel that the good God set his mark upon the spot, and pronounced it accursed for ever!

"It was during the winter, when the snow lay hard and deep upon the ground, and made it easy to travel by sleigh across the marshes and lakes, that the people at the different stations, scattered wide apart throughout the back woods, from these parts away northward to the frozen seas, were accustomed to assemble together in large parties, and come to visit one another, and pass a day or two—sometimes more—at each station in wild, drunken revelry. Bons camarades they used to call themselves. Ah, me! I fear they were bons camarades of the evil one!

"Sometimes they brought women with them, sometimes they came alone—all men together. M'sieu MacSteven heard that a large party were coming from the next station to pay him a visit; and the Indian boy, Pierre, who was his servant, told afterwards that there was one among this expected party of whom his master was jealous, because he was a fine, handsome young man, who had admired Louise, and to whom he fancied she was secretly attached. He wished Louise not to meet this young man; and gave her permission to go, in company with Pierre, to see her friends, whom she had expressed a desire to visit a few days before.

"Now, however, Louise refused to go. She said that a snow-storm was threatening,

and that the Indian village was far distant, and she would remain and enjoy herself with the party that was coming, and go afterwards to visit her friends.

"M'sieu MacSteven charged her with wishing to stay to see the youth of whom he was jealous. This she denied at first; but M'sieu persisting in his charge, Louise, who was proud and high-spirited, and vain of the beauty that everybody praised, grew angry, and began to taunt M'sieu, and said what if she did wish to see the young man? He admired her, and she had few opportunities to be admired, cooped up as she was in the gloomy forest, seeing nobody, day after day, for months together, but him (M'sieu Steven).

"They came to high words, and M'sieu in his passion was terrible, and heedless of what he said or did. And Louise, brought up among the Indians from her infancy, was fearless, and little less furious in her passion than he.

"The Indian boy, Pierre, heard fierce words pass between them, and then there was a scuffle, and blows were struck, and then came a terrible scream from Louise, as a heavy, crushing blow was struck, at the head of the stairs. Twice was this fearful scream repeated, and then a brief moment of silence was followed by shouts of mocking, fiendish laughter, as if devils were exulting over the success of some evil scheme!

"Pierre was so frightened that he fled from the house, and took refuge in the barn. Presently he heard his master calling him by name, but he was too frightened to reply; and M'sieu MacSteven came downstairs to him, looking pale and ghastly and terrified, as the boy had never seen him before. Pierre was obliged to answer when his name was again called, and he came forth from the barn; and M'sieu MacSteven—though darkness was already coming on, and a storm was threatening—bade him go home to see his friends alone, as Louise had determined to stay to see the company.

"Monsieur MacSteven spoke in so strange a voice, and his looks were so wild, that the boy did not dare to say it was so late, and the weather looked so threatening that he would prefer to wait till morning, though he was really afraid to set out for the distant Indian village at that late hour, with every probability of being caught in the storm; besides, he was terrified by what he had

heard, and by what he feared had occurred. He would have made an excuse if he had dared; but these rough men were accustomed to wait upon themselves in their revels, when they had not women with them, so he could not make an excuse by offering to wait upon the expected party. Moreover, he was afraid of harm coming to himself if his master should suspect that he fancied that something was wrong.

"So he made no reply, but pretended to set out at once; though, instead of so doing, he concealed himself again in the barn, intending to remain throughout the night, and set out on the morrow. The threatened snow-storm soon commenced, the snow falling lightly at first, but speedily increasing; while the wind rose rapidly. It was already dark, and Pierre laid him down amidst some straw in one corner of the barn, and tried to compose himself to sleep; but the fright he had received, the strange looks of his master, and the terrible suspicions he entertained, kept him awake.

"The barn was in the rear of the house, separated from it only by a thin wooden partition; and Pierre was soon aroused from his dismal thoughts by a noise of hammering, proceeding apparently from the back room on the upper floor of the house. The sound seemed to shake the partition close to his head; and he bethought him that a large chest, in which skins were sometimes kept, stood in the upper back room against the partition. His master, he thought, must be fastening up this chest with nails; but why he should do so Pierre could not for the moment conceive, for he well knew that the chest was empty, and had been so for some time past.

"Ah, messieurs," sighed the old lady, "M'sieu MacSteven's wicked object for fastening this chest was soon discovered.

"The sound of the hammer was still ringing in the ears of the terrified Pierre, when he heard the distant jingle of sleigh bells. He knew the meaning of this. His master's expected guests, who it was thought would be delayed by the threatening aspect of the weather, were approaching. They came rapidly nearer and nearer, hurrying on to gain shelter from the storm.

"Soon Pierre heard the tramp of the horses' hoofs—for the soft falling snow had not yet covered the frozen soil—and the sound of men's voices, in rude, boisterous merriment.

"M'sieu MacSteven also heard his guests approaching. The hammering ceased a few moments, then it was rapidly resumed for a brief space; and then Pierre heard the hammer thrown to the floor from his master's hand—for the position conveyed every sound to his ears—and the chest was dragged along the floor, nearer to the corner of the room. Presently, M'sieu MacSteven came downstairs to receive his guests, and Pierre heard a woman's voice among the rest, and recognised the voice as that of Mdlle. Desiré—the wife, as she was called, of the m'sieu who lived at the next station.

"The guests had hardly arrived before the storm set in in earnest. The wind blew, and the snow fell thick and fast; and fierce gusts whistled wildly amidst the forest trees, and shook the house and barn to their foundations as they swept furiously around them. But the wild tempest without only seemed to make the guests merrier in their snug shelter. They watched the drifting snow and driving sleet, and listened to the howling of the wind; and blessed their good fortune which had enabled them to reach their destination before the storm came on in its fury. They ate and drank, and talked, and sang, and laughed, and their merriment grew constantly more and more boisterous; and Pierre, the Indian boy, whom M'sieu MacSteven believed to be far away, lay listening to the storm without and the wild revels within doors, and heard all that was going on.

"The guests had brought music with them, as was their custom when they set forth on these rounds of visits; and by and by they rose from the table, and made preparations for the dance. There was but one woman with them—Mdlle. Desiré—but that was no matter. When they had not women, men took men for their partners in the rude dance; and the upper back room was brilliantly lighted up with torches, and the fiddlers played merrily, and the floor shook beneath the heavy tread of the dancers, who, flushed with drink, stamped their feet violently, and yelled, and leaped, and filled the air with fearful curses, amidst their wild laughter. Mdlle. Desiré's merry laughter could be distinguished by Pierre, ringing forth loud and shrill amidst the hoarser voices of the men; and, far across the wide expanse of snow-covered ground, the torch-lights gleamed so brightly from the windows of the upper room, glittering amidst the falling snow, and

making it to appear like sparks of fire, that Pierre, weary of lying awake, was tempted to rise and gaze forth upon the bright stream of light, which might have been visible through the storm, many miles distant.

"At length, the mad revellers began to grow weary, or were overcome by the liquor they drank, and one after another fell off from the dance. The music grew fainter, and soon ceased to be heard, and silence reigned within the house. Pierre crept back to his corner amongst the straw, and while listening to the storm which still raged without, fell sound asleep.

"He woke in the morning, long before day-break. The storm had ceased, and the moon shone forth bright and clear in the cloudless sky. The lad shivered with cold, and for some moments was unable to conceive where he was. At length he recollected the events of the past evening; and afraid of being seen by his master when the latter should awake, he quitted the barn, and, wading knee-deep through the fresh fallen snow, made his way towards his native village. Exercise soon restored the circulation of his blood, and brought warmth to his half-frozen limbs; and now he began to consider how he should act, and whether he should acquaint his friends with his dreadful suspicions, when they should inquire of him respecting Louise. He resolved finally to tell all that he suspected; but the way to his village was long and wearisome. He had eaten nothing since noon on the previous day; and as the keen frosty air sharpened his appetite, he soon felt desperately hungry and weary, though he had still many leagues to travel through the snow. Fortunately, just as day was breaking, he fell in with an Indian trapper—one of his own village people—who took him to his hut in the forest near by, and set food before the hungry lad.

"I have told you, m'sieurs," continued the old lady, "that Louise was a half-breed—the daughter of a French Canadian, by an Indian mother. The trapper, whose name was Elkfoot, but who was known as Tom by the English traders, was her uncle—her mother's brother; and he asked after his niece, and wanted to know whether she were coming to the village to visit her friends, as was her custom at least once during the winter.

"Pierre related to Elkfoot what he had seen and heard on the previous day, and spoke

of the suspicions he entertained. The Indians were proud of Louise's beauty. She was both admired and loved by the people of her native village; and Elkfoot, when he had heard Pierre's story, resolved to ascertain the truth, and vowed to take fearful vengeance if any harm had befallen his niece. Pierre and he remained a long time at the hut, deliberating upon the best course to pursue. Elkfoot was undecided whether to go at once to the station and demand to see Louise, and if she were not forthcoming to denounce M'sieu MacSteven as her murderer in the presence of his assembled guests; or whether, being somewhat doubtful of obtaining justice from the English traders, to take the law into his own hands, and take prompt Indian revenge; while the boy, Pierre, who held his master in great dread, was afraid to appear before him after what had occurred.

"They were still in earnest argument, when three sleighs, all laden with passengers, were seen approaching the hut. The occupants of these sleighs were the late guests of MacSteven, who, finding him unusually dull and distraught, had shortened their visit, and on awaking from their debauch, had resolved to set forth immediately after breakfast for the next station instead of remaining over the day as they had intended; and it appeared that their host, instead of pressing them to remain, as he would have done had he been in his ordinary hospitable mood, had speeded them on their way, and had seemed to feel relieved by their departure. Pierre, who recognized these people, told Elkfoot who and what they were; and the latter immediately rushed forth from the hut, and arresting the progress of the travellers, inquired of one, who appeared to be the chief of the party, whether he had seen Mdlle. Louise at M'sieu MacSteven's station.

"Hilloa! What, Trapper Tom, is it you?" cried the person to whom he had addressed himself. "Have we seen Mdlle. Louise, ask you? No, boy. She's with her friends at the village, is she not? The station is dull as ditchwater without her, and MacSteve is in the dumps by reason of her absence, I suppose. We should all have had a fit of the blues if we had remained there another day, as we purposed."

"Elkfoot replied that Louise was not at the Indian village, which he had quitted only on the previous day; and then he re-

lated what he had heard from Pierre. The party, surprised and startled by what they now heard, questioned the Indian boy closely. They now recollected many things that had occurred at the station which looked suspicious, though they had paid little attention to them at the moment, and began to think that Pierre's suspicions might be correct.

"Some among them, however, said it was no business of theirs. It rested between Louise's friends and Mac, to settle between themselves. Others, with whom Louise was a favourite, and especially Mdle. Desiré and the young man of whom MacSteven was said to be jealous, declared that justice should be done, whatever might be the result; and insisted upon returning to the station, and carrying Elkfoot and Pierre with them.

"Elkfoot sprang eagerly into one of the sleighs, and Pierre was compelled to enter another sorely against his will, for he feared his master would kill him.

"The sleighs were put about, and in another hour they were again approaching the station they had so lately left.

"As they drew near, the Indian boy touched the arm of him who drove the foremost sleigh.

"'Ugh!' he exclaimed, and he raised his forefinger, and inclined his ear in the attitude of one who listens. At a sign from the head of the party all the sleighs were stopped for a few moments, and the tap, tap of a hammer on some metallic substance was distinctly audible.

"'I heard just so, before m'sieurs came last night,' muttered the boy, in accents of terror.

"'Slowly and softly, lads,' cried the driver of the leading sleigh; and the three vehicles passed slowly and almost silently over the yielding snow.

"Quietly as they proceeded, however, it appeared that their approach was either seen or heard. The taps of the hammer, which had fallen regularly from the moment when they were first audible to the returning party, suddenly ceased, and profound silence succeeded.

"M'sieu MacSteven came not forth to welcome his returning visitors, or to congratulate himself and them that they had altered their minds, and were still his guests.

"He came not downstairs to greet them

when they entered the house. They found no one to welcome their return. A strange, ominous silence prevailed. They called aloud, but no answer was returned; and it was almost with a feeling of dread that they ascended the stairs.

"The foremost to enter the room started back in dismay, and uttered a cry of terror. The others pressed forward in a body, and, to their horror, beheld the body of their late host suspended by a cord to a large hook, affixed to a beam that crossed the centre of the ceiling.

"A chair, by means of which the suicide had apparently placed the loop on the hook, after having previously fixed the noose round his neck, had been kicked over after the body was suspended, as the feet reached within a few inches of the floor. To spring forward and cut down the body was the natural impulse after the first shock felt at the sight they beheld. The body was quite warm; in fact, life still existed after it was cut down and laid upon the floor. But, after a few faint sighs and convulsive movements the suicide ceased to breathe. They had arrived a few moments too late.

"It was evident that M'sieu MacSteven had not hanged himself until he had seen his late guests approaching, and most probably had suspected the object of their return; for the hammer with which he had been engaged as they neared the house was lying on the floor, beside a few nails, which had not yet been driven into the chest-lid he had been nailing down.

"That the noose must have been prepared beforehand was evident, but whether with the intention of using it, save as a *dernier ressort*, was not known. Some thought that suicide had been determined upon. Others believed that if certain arrangements could have been carried into effect, flight had been resolved upon; or why was time occupied in nailing down the chest? And why was it that the pockets of the suicide were found to be filled with gold and bank notes?

"These latter believed that M'sieu MacSteven had resolved never to be taken alive, and that but for the return of his guests the noose would not have been used.

"Perceiving that life was extinct in the body of their late host, the horrified guests, who had little anticipated such a result to their annual visit to the station, proceeded to open the chest. This was a difficult task, the lid being so firmly nailed down. But it

was at length accomplished, and inside was found the body of the murdered Louise—fully attired, and with the arms laid across the bosom in a natural position, as if she were asleep. Death had evidently been caused instantaneously by a blow on the back of the head, which had crushed the skull.

"The murder had not, probably, been intentional. The blow had been struck in a moment of ungovernable passion, caused by jealousy, and had been the result of the quarrel listened to by the Indian boy, Pierre. Expecting his guests to arrive, the murderer, after finding that life was extinct in the victim of his jealous passion, had hastily placed the body in the chest, and had been employed in nailing down the lid, as heard by Pierre, when he was interrupted by the approach of the sleighs. The lid, however, was sufficiently confined to prevent its being raised by any curious visitor, and dragging the chest into a corner, he had gone to welcome his guests, excusing the non-appearance of Louise by stating that she had gone to the Indian village on a visit to her relatives and friends.

"The horror of the story, m'sieurs," continued the old lady, "consists in the fact that, during the wild, wicked revel that ensued, while the party were eating and drinking, and engaged in singing songs, and while fiddles were playing merrily, and dancing was going forward, the body of the murdered victim of jealousy lay, silently appealing, as it were, to Heaven for judgment, in the very room that was so brilliantly lighted up for dancing and feasting; and it is said that many of the revellers seated themselves upon the chest and partook of refreshments, as they rested themselves after their frantic exertions; and one fell asleep upon it, worn out with fatigue and overcome by drink, and there slept until morning, little thinking what lay beneath him, separated from him but by one thin, painted board.

"What horror must have been felt by the murderer throughout that dreadful night, while the storm raged with unusual fury round the house, as if the elements were denouncing the terrible crime that had been committed!

"No one can tell. But it is little wonder that even his hardened conscience was touched, and that in his remorse and despair he listened to the suggestions of the demons who urged him to suicide.

"It is little marvel that, since that day—long years ago—the spot has been held accursed by Heaven, and that demons have kept sway over it, and held revels in memory of the horrid deed, being ever most active in times of storm and tempest.

"You, m'sieurs, have escaped fortunately. Many who have been driven by the storm to pass a night in yonder accursed abode have for ever after rued the hour in which they approached it. May the great God and the blessed Virgin protect those who inadvertently go near the spot, and avert evil from them!"

And once more crossing herself devoutly, the old lady thus concluded her story, which had been eagerly listened to by the assembled neighbours, who had every now and then, by shaking their heads gravely or by nodding at one another, attested, as it were, to the truth of the story.

THE GHOST IN THE SNOW.

CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSION.

"AND you, *bonne mère*, have you known any one who has experienced evil or suffered injury through taking refuge in that deserted dwelling?" asked Markham.

"Ah! *m'sieu, moi*? Truly, not many," replied the old dame; "because, see you, *m'sieu*, people avoid the spot, and would rather risk exposure to the storm than seek shelter there."

"They're in the right of it, too," muttered the lieutenant. "I was an ensign during the Crimean war, and was in the attack upon the Redan, and sharp work that was, I can tell you, and it left its mark upon me" (drawing up his sleeve and displaying a cicatrized wound on his left arm, which appeared as if it had nearly severed it just above the wrist). "But I swear I'd rather face twenty Redans, and assist in a *Balaclava* charge to boot, than pass a night alone in that infernal place. By George! I like to know that it's living flesh and blood that I'm opposed to. Though," he added, "I wouldn't mind making one of a party to go prepared for what might follow, and to endeavour to penetrate the mystery or level the cursed place to the ground."

The young officer spoke in English, and the old dame looked at me inquiringly, as though to ask me to explain what he had said. I translated the latter portion of his speech into French, and she raised her eyes to Heaven and crossed herself as she replied—

"The good God forbid! The young *m'sieu* knows not what he has said. Those who have refused to take warning, and have dared to return to the house again, have suffered for their rashness.

"I have said, *m'sieurs*, that I have not known many who have passed a night at the accursed spot. But long years ago there were many victims who suffered evil.

"When I was but a little child, I heard the old people tell many a terrible story of what they had known and seen, that made me afraid to sleep. As I have said, of late years the spot has been avoided; but, *m'sieurs*, many years ago, soon after I was married to the *bonhomme*, who is now in heaven, a young man of the name of Jacques Cartier Lemoine, who was about to be wedded to one of the prettiest and best maidens of the village—of pure French blood, *m'sieurs*—was benighted in a snow-storm, as were you, *m'sieurs*, the past night. He returned to the village next day, sad, pale, and dejected—he who was ever the gayest of the gay. He never told what he had seen, not even to *M'sieu le Prêtre*, nor to his sweetheart. He would not be questioned about it. But from that day he, who had never been sick a single hour since his childhood, pined away, and was afraid to be in the dark, or to be left alone a moment, even in the daytime. Three months later he died; and his sweetheart, who attended him to the last with the most loving care and tenderness,



took his death so much to heart that in another three months she likewise was a corpse! There are numbers of people still living who can recollect that sad affair.

"Eh bien, m'sieurs, one would think this was enough of evil; but Jacques Cartier had a cousin, named François Xavier,* who was greatly attached to him. François Xavier Lemoine was a fine handsome man, brave as a lion, who feared neither man nor demon. He was absent abroad when his cousin died, and did not return till ten years afterwards. When, however, he heard what had occurred to his cousin, he could not be persuaded otherwise than that some vile trick had been played upon him. He suspected that the house was occupied, at times, by some persons for evil purposes, who sought to terrify others from approaching the accursed spot. In spite of the appeals of his friends, and even of M'sieur le Prêtre, he vowed that he would go to the house armed, and pass night after night in it, till he could discover the perpetrators of these outrages; and if they would not present themselves before him, he would raze the house to its foundation.

"He asked many to accompany him, that he might have sufficient force to defend himself, if he were attacked; but no one would hearken to him.

"Eh bien, m'sieurs! He went alone; but he spent but one night in the house. He came home the next day, but not until near dark, so changed that his friends, at first, could hardly believe it was he.

"He spoke to no one; but his conduct was strange, and it was soon apparent that he—the bravest and handsomest man in the village, and the best hunter for miles around, who never missed his mark, nor returned from the forest without spoil—had become an idiot! He took to wandering about alone, always going well armed, but never doing harm to any one, and never more returning with game or skins from the forest; and *he*, just three months afterwards, drowned himself in the lake.

"So, you perceive, m'sieurs, that it is daring the power of the evil spirits to go to

seek them; and those who thus venture suffer for their daring.

"There are many of you," looking round upon her neighbours, "who well remember the poor, brave François Xavier Lemoine?"

There was a general murmur of assent, and the old dame continued—

"Since that time, m'sieurs, I have heard of none who have passed a night in the accursed house, save yourselves; but there are many who have incautiously ventured near it, after dark, who have heard strange cries that have filled them with terror; and many more, who, in nights of storm and tempest, in the cold winter, have seen the lights gleaming across the snow, and lighting up the woods and plains for miles around—such lights as are caused by no human power!"

Again the old lady's words were corroborated by the listeners, and our aged half-breed informed us that, though the land for a mile around the house belonged to it, none of the heirs of M'sieu MacSteven had ever dared to take possession of the property, or to pull down the house, for fear of the consequences of so doing; and that though he had heard that the property, in dresses of value and other articles, left in the house after the death of MacSteven was very considerable, no one had ever dared to remove a single article.

This statement, to a certain extent, appeared to be verified by what we had seen; though MacSteven must have had some furniture in the dwelling, and the old man did not say what had become of that, nor did we question him relative to the subject.

But with respect to the first portion of the above statement, I learnt, at a subsequent period, that the estate of MacSteven—like most of the landed property left by the earlier, inferior agents of the Company—was in the hands of the lawyers, had been so for no one knows how many years, and was likely so to remain until it was no longer worth contesting.

Most of these individuals, in former days, died intestate, and in the irregular life they led, regardless of laws which could not reach them, they frequently—if those who claimed to be their heirs were to be credited—contracted illegal marriages, or committed bigamy, or married secretly the squaws and other women with whom they lived. At their decease there were always a number of persons claiming to be their lawful

* One-fourth at least of the male population of the French Canadian and half-breed races of Canada bear the Christian names of Jacques Cartier or François Xavier—the former being the name of the first discoverer of the St. Lawrence River, the latter that of a zealous Jesuit priest, who converted great numbers of the Indians to Christianity.

descendants, who avowed that their mothers or grandmothers had been first—and, therefore, lawfully—wedded to the deceased, and that they, or those from whom they were descended, were, consequently, born in lawful wedlock. These parties not only contested the property thus left against the Crown, but also against one another, each one claiming descent from the earliest marriage; and as it was difficult, and, in fact, almost impossible, to discover the truth or falsehood of such claims, the estates were held in Chancery, or were bound up in some other way, so long as there was anything to be gained out of them. Hence the number of these tenements, in a state of ruin and dilapidation, scattered throughout the country.

We had now heard all that we were able to learn respecting the mysterious occurrences of the past night, although we had learnt nothing satisfactory, nor anything that tended in any degree to clear up the mystery.

Markham and I were anxious to return to the camp, and the lieutenant was equally desirous of joining his comrades at the Cedar Lake. So we made the venerable old dame happy with the gift of another half-dollar, and presented her also with the small stock of brandy and provisions that remained to us, and hiring a young man of the village for half-a-dollar to guide us to the regular road or path—which, we were informed, was four miles distant through the forest—we re-entered our respective sleighs, our guide seating himself beside Hoptown, who had a seat to spare in his sleigh, and set forth on our return.

On the way we conversed on the events of the past night, and the legends we had heard from the old dame in the half-breed village.

So far, however, from having heard any elucidation of the mysteries we could not comprehend, they had been rendered more incomprehensible than ever. Although it seemed to be impossible that we could each and all have been the dupes of imagination, we had, when the broad daylight returned, and in the absence of any other satisfactory explanation of what we had heard and seen, almost arrived at such a conclusion. Our visit to the half-breed village, however, had set at nought any such explanation as this. Even supposing it possible that the lieutenant had been led to find shelter from the storm

by approaching towards a bright illumination which had only appeared in his imagination, yet which had conducted him to the shelter he sought; and supposing it possible that, at an after period, each of us had *fancied* that he heard a frightful scream, and saw the figure of a female clothed in white, and heard also the mocking laughter and the horrible noise of the continuous rapping, and that our horses had also been terrified at the same moment by some unusual sight or sound—supposing, I say, that these strange fancies could have occurred to each and all of us at the same moment, such a supposition does not explain by what means our imaginations could have been excited to fancy a representation of events which had actually occurred in the spot a century before.

Not one of us had ever heard of the murder of a young woman by her paramour at the moment when he expected visitors to arrive; or of the concealment of the body of the unfortunate female in a chest, the lid of which was hammered down by the murderer; or of the arrival of the expected visitors, and the horrible carousal kept up in the brilliantly lighted room in which the body lay concealed from the sight of the revellers; yet we had fancied that we had heard the scream of terror heard by the Indian boy, according to the legend, and, at the same moment, had fancied that we saw the figure of the murdered woman flit across the head of the staircase, at the very spot where she had been struck down; and had subsequently heard the tap-tapping of the murderer in his endeavour to conceal the body of his victim; and, moreover, the young officer had fancied that he saw the brilliant illumination reported by the Indian boy to have shed a bright gleam of light across the broad expanse of snow, that must have been visible, through the storm, many miles distant.

If all this was mere fancy, there must have been some especially exciting cause to have created such fancies in our minds. In fact, the whole affair was inexplicable by any ordinary mode of reasoning; and though we each and all denied any belief in the supernatural, we could explain what we saw and heard in no other way than by admitting that it must have been caused by supernatural agency. As I observed at the commencement of this paper, unless I had heard and seen that which I have described, I could

not have believed it, and therefore I can hardly expect credence from others. But two other persons also heard and saw what I did; and although one of these individuals—the young lieutenant—has since died in the East Indies, the other, whom I have described as Markham, is still living, and still employed as Government surveyor, in Western Canada; and should he peruse this narrative, I am confident that he will freely acknowledge that I have represented nothing that did not actually occur, as represented, at the time and on the spot I have described.

So far as my memory serves me, after the lapse of so many years, I have adhered literally to the very words of the conversation that passed between myself and my companions; and have translated, as nearly literally as possible, the story told in French-Canadian patois by the venerable and chatty old dame in the half-breed village in the backwoods of the Far West.

I end my story as I began it, with the assertion that there is, in a greater or lesser degree, a latent feeling of superstition inherent in every human being. We may affect to deny and despise such feelings; nevertheless, there is truth in the oft-quoted phrase that Shakspeare put into the mouth of Hamlet—

“There are more things in Heaven and earth,
Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

THE END.

I

